

January 1, 2010 - Census Numbers Point to Pennsylvania Losing House Seat

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

www.pittsburghlive.com

Census numbers point to Pennsylvania losing House seat

By Salena Zito, TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Friday, January 1, 2010

The last time Pennsylvania lost a congressional seat, a political war ensued between Democratic Reps. John Murtha and Frank Mascara for the sprawling new 12th District.

That 2002 primary race — created by a Republican-drawn redistricting plan — was one of the few contests nationwide that pitted an incumbent versus an incumbent in a newly formed district.

The scenario could play out again as Pennsylvania is expected to be one of 9 states to lose a congressional seat (Ohio would lose two), based on census estimates showing slower growth here. A state that in 1930 had 36 members of Congress is expected to send only 18 representatives to the House after the results of the 2010 Census are used to redraw boundaries in 2011.

"Geopolitically speaking, population is power in the United States," said Jeff Brauer, political science professor at Keystone College in Lackawanna County.

Whoever is in power in the state Legislature after next year's elections will largely determine how the lines are drawn, making state legislative races of national importance to both political parties. A new governor, who will need to sign legislation creating new districts, will take office in 2011.

Republicans hold a solid majority in the state Senate and Democrats control a narrow margin in the state House. Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell leaves office next year.

"The state House races are pivotal to the process," said Franklin & Marshall College pollster G. Terry Madonna.

"If you think that the 2010 races for governor and U.S. Senate will be enough intrigue in politics for junkies, it is nothing compared to the inside game that will be played out by the state House and Senate along with a new governor in the battle to redraw the congressional seats," said GOP strategist Kent Gates.

Census estimates show the state population climbed only 2.6 percent to about 12.6 million people between 2000 and 2009. That's well short of population gains of more than 24 percent in Utah, 28 percent in Arizona and 32 percent in Nevada, estimates show. The 435 members of Congress are spread among states based on population, with each member representing about 700,000 people.

Losing members lessens the state's power base both inside the Capitol and in presidential politics.

"Slow population growth will also mean less in influence for Pennsylvania in electoral politics," Brauer said.

With its relatively larger number of electoral votes (21) and moderate voters, Pennsylvania is considered by presidential hopefuls as a battleground state. More visits by candidates bring national attention to Pennsylvania issues and needs, Brauer said, and can make them part of national policy.

Losing one electoral vote might not change Pennsylvania's status as a battleground state, said Washington-based Democratic strategist Steve McMahon.

Losing a seat in Congress can eventually hurt seniority, though, Madonna said. Chairmanships of committees are based on how long a member served.

"It is the length of service that matters, period," he said.

In 1996, with 21 members, Pennsylvanians chaired five committees or sub-committees. Only two of the state's 19 members — Murtha and Rep. Paul Kanjorski of Scranton — chair committees.

"If you don't think seniority matters, ask John Murtha, he has used his chairmanship on appropriations more effectively than anyone in state history," Madonna said.

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